



Conducted by
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“On the basis of pleading for a complete return to Christianity as it was in the beginning, how would you acknowledge Acts 11:15 concerning the pattern of the early church; this reads, ‘And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning’?”

I gather that the questioner had a discussion with some brethren of a local assembly of Christians concerning the importance and validity of water baptism, and wasn't altogether pleased with the conduct and outcome of that discussion. He feels, if I understand him aright, that too much emphasis is placed on water baptism, based on what he believes to be flimsy scriptural evidence, and not enough emphasis on baptism of the Holy Spirit which I think he believes is substantiated by the scripture quoted above. He is quite right in his basic premise that if we plead for

a complete return to N.T. Christianity then we should be able to give a sound reason for those things which we believe and teach. This we shall now attempt to do, and in order to explain the significance of the text quoted above we shall have to think about it in the context of Acts of Apostles chapters 10 and 11.

The Context

We must begin by understanding that there are two records of the same event. In Acts chapter 10 we have the record of Luke, who is believed by most scholars to have written Acts of Apostles, and in Acts chapter 11 we have Peter's account of the same event as he recounted it to the apostles and brethren in Jerusalem. Luke's account is a factual record of what occurred; Peter's account is explained by the scripture, "But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying . . ." (Acts 11:4). The fact that the matter was rehearsed from the beginning *in order*, is extremely important.

The Event

This event marks the inception of the gospel to the Gentile nations. It is accomplished initially in the person of one Cornelius, a centurion, and his household. The architect of this stupendous event is God. The instrument of God's will is the apostle Peter. Up to this time the recipients of the gospel were exclusively Jewish; the Gentiles were not considered fit subjects for this divine grace.

Cornelius was a devout man. The scripture tells us that he was visited by an angel of God who informed him that his prayers and alms had come up as a memorial before God (Acts 10:4). Such a person, we would think, might merit full acceptance by God, but he was instructed to send for Peter, "And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter; he lodgeth with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do" (10:5, 6). Notice how God indicates His chosen messenger; He doesn't want any mistake by getting the wrong Simon. The reader will also notice that Cornelius is *to be told* what he should do: this would seem to indicate a *spoken message*.

The following day Peter was praying on the housetop of the house where he was staying, and he became hungry. He had a vision of a great sheet coming down from heaven, and in this sheet was all manner of four-footed beasts, and fowls of the air; a voice told him to kill and eat. Peter declined, saying that he did not eat the common or unclean (it is a Jewish custom not to eat *all* kinds of meat). The voice *insisted*, however, that what God had cleansed should no longer be looked upon as common or unclean. After this had been done three times the vessel (sheet) was raised up into heaven. While Peter pondered the meaning of this (v19) the Holy Spirit said unto him, "Behold, three men seek thee. Arise, therefore, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them" (vv19, 20). It is worthy of note that the Spirit sent these men to bring Peter to Cornelius. What would have been the need for that if the Spirit was going to save Cornelius by acting *directly* on him? But we shall see. So they came to the house of Cornelius, who had called together his kinsmen and close friends. Peter was accompanied by six brethren.

Drama at Caesarea

It is evident, when one views God's preparatory arrangements, that notable things were to happen at Caesarea. Both Cornelius and Peter had been prepared; the 'fulness of time' had come for the gospel to be received by the Gentiles.

Peter then opened this mouth and began to speak to the assembled company. He told them how he had come to understand that God was no respecter of persons. He then went on to speak about the good news of salvation in Christ, how that he had

been put to death, buried, and raised from the dead; in other words, he brought these Gentiles the gospel. Then an amazing thing happened; let Peter tell it as he recounted it to the brethren at Jerusalem, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15).

The mistake that many of our religious friends make is in equating the advent of the Holy Spirit on this occasion with salvation. The scripture doesn't teach that, nor should we teach it either. You will notice that the angel which appeared to Cornelius said to him, "Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; Who shall *tell thee words*, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (11:14). So it was not by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit that these people were to be saved, but by *the words* which Peter should speak to them. You will also notice that when the Spirit fell on them Peter had *not yet* stated the gospel, for he says, "And as I *began* to speak . . .", so if Cornelius was saved when the Spirit fell, then we are led to the inevitable and anti-scriptural idea that he was saved *before he heard* the gospel and obeyed it. At Pentecost and since, no one was or is saved except by reception of the spoken word and obedience to the gospel contained therein. That Peter acted in accordance with God's will at Caesarea cannot be denied, because later when he spoke to the brethren at Jerusalem he said, "Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles *by my mouth* should hear the word of the gospel, and believe" (Acts 15:7).

Confirmation to the Church

If the foregoing is true, then we have to ask ourselves, "Why did the Spirit fall on the household of Cornelius"? You will recall that Peter said that he took six brethren with him to Caesarea. When the Spirit fell on the household of Cornelius, these brethren, being jews, reacted in a predictable way, "And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10:45). Why were they astonished? Well, so far as the gospel was concerned, it had been looked upon to this time as a Jewish 'closed shop'; now, here were the Gentiles being treated by God as they, God's chosen people, had been treated by Him; well might Peter say, "I perceive that God is no respecter of persons." It would seem, then, that the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on the household of Cornelius was to *confirm* to the *Jewish church* that the Gentiles were fit subjects for the gospel. No other explanation will suffice.

The Words

What, then, were the words whereby the household of Cornelius should be saved? Peter said, "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: That word, Isay, ye know, which was published throughout all Judaea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached" (Acts 10: 36, 37). Matthew records that the eleven disciples went away into Galilee as Jesus had appointed them. Jesus came unto them and said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:16-20).

On the first Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples in Jerusalem and Peter began to preach the gospel. He called for faith, repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:38). Later on, in explanation of what happened at the household of Cornelius, Peter said, "And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as He did unto us; *and put no difference between us and them*, purifying

their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8, 9). So if God put no difference between the Jew and Gentile then the means of salvation must have been the same in each case.

Therefore, on the basis of the scriptures we have discussed, we can say with some conviction the following:

1. The Holy Spirit fell on the household of Cornelius *before* they heard the gospel.
2. This being so, it was meant to indicate from God's part that the Gentiles were *fit subjects* for the gospel.
3. The terms of the gospel were the same as in Acts 2, and all cases thereafter in the N.T.; faith, repentance, confession, immersion in water for the remission of sins.
4. That immersion in water is meant cannot be denied, because Peter said, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptised, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord" (Acts 10: 47,48).

Dear reader, the Bible is its own explainer. Let it teach you.

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